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THE ARTISTIC TEACHING OF ENGLISH¹

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A story is current to the effect that a certain undergraduate in an eastern college was dissatisfied with the president of the institution because his interest in athletic events was not such as a properly qualified president should show. The youthful critic concluded scornfully: "He is never known to sit through a football game; you see, his tastes run too much to literature and that sort of thing."

This is an old story of the pupil's suspicion of culture and his defensive attitude toward it. We of the profession always derive a little melancholy amusement from such artless admissions. But I fancy that there are laymen not a few who would construe the anecdote differently and would find in it another iteration—out of the mouths of babes and sucklings, as it were—of the regrettable truth, not about one president of a college, but about the teaching profession at large. They would agree with the undergraduate that our tastes do "run too much to literature and that sort of thing"; that is, that we are not quite human, natural, or "practical" in our likings and tendencies. We are limited, they think, ascetic, awkward, and queer in our enthusiasms. Something about our profession unfits us for any "practical" function, from being president of the United States to keeping a small bank account or sewing on buttons; and this prejudice they naïvely betray in astonished applause whenever one of us happens to prove his ability and interest in "practical" affairs.

With the common prejudice so strong, what wonder if we sometimes forget the dignity of our calling, and come to look upon ourselves as perfunctory drudges and nothing more. So that if one of us dares to allege, as I now do, not only that we are human and normal, but that in our field we are actually creative artists, his

¹ An address delivered before the New Jersey Association of Teachers of English at Trenton, November 25, 1916.

fellow-craftsmen may suspect him of trying to cheer and comfort himself and them with a bit of fanciful and innocent flattery. And yet, seriously, we have points in common with the artist. We depend in no small measure upon what is called inspiration. We achieve our successes through a combination of instinct with calculating skill. We endeavor to maintain in ourselves a lively sense of the ideal world, yet we may at no time lose sympathy with common life. And we are subject to wide and unaccountable fluctuations of spirit. Surely the kinship of the teacher with the artist is not wholly fanciful.

Art—fine art—is, roughly, the exercise of creative skill through the mind and the imagination. Such, in no strained sense, is the teaching of English.

By English I do not mean, as we are prone to mean, three subjects—language, composition, and literature—but one subject, which it may sometimes be convenient to consider in any one of these three aspects, but which must, in the interests of sound teaching, be regarded ever as one.

And in entering upon this discussion let us recall the nature and gravity of our responsibility. The rapid rise of English as a liberal study has flattered us with perhaps an exaggerated sense of security. That rise is probably due in large measure to a certain decline in other and older liberal studies. All liberal studies should be in large measure humanistic. I use “humanistic” in a broader sense. I mean that such subjects should be taught in a way that tends to enlighten the learner, according to his capabilities, concerning basic and universal truth in human life, to reveal to him the more essential values of life, and render him more intelligent and eager in the art of serious living.

In our older curriculum this function seemed to have declined, perhaps through the fault of perfunctory or unskilful teaching. English was seized upon instinctively in schools and colleges as the readiest means of restoring the humanistic balance. Of course a hundred reasons were urged in its favor, but this, I believe, was the dominant one. The prime function of English studies, then, is not essentially different from that of other liberal studies, except that it is now more heavily imposed upon us than upon them, and

is thus ours in a peculiar sense. Whether in teaching English composition, the English language, or English literature, our business is to humanize our subject, to make it the means of revealing essential facts and values of human life, and to render young people more intelligent and eager in the art of living.

Now the performance of this function, you will agree, is a fine art. In the terms of our definition it requires the exercise of creative skill through the mind and the imagination.

First, as to skill. This is the result of intelligent training and practice; it is technique. The popular notion that almost anyone can teach from his first attempt at teaching is as absurd as it would be to expect one to guide an express train safely the first time he sat in a cab. Teachers who have toiled for years, have studied from day to day every detail of their own performance, have been each moment open to self-revision in all particulars of their processes in the classroom, have considered and tried every imaginable device, rejecting some, and building others into their slowly mastered skill, who are ever keenly alive to its imperfection, ever struggling like the great masters in art, their reach exceeding their grasp, their skill never perfect—such teachers know the meaning of the word technique. It concerns, not merely what a teacher says in a class, but even the least detail of his appearance there.

There is an important element of the histrionic in all good teaching. An undergraduate, when asked why the brilliant Professor X, whose teaching labored under the disadvantage of more or less coltish disorder in his classes, was not more successful, said: "Well, he'd be all right if he'd only change his necktie once in a while." But good teaching depends upon more than a happy choice of neckwear or the general effect of costume. One of the most successful teachers of college English that I know *is* successful, if I am correct in my analysis of his achievements, because he is essentially an actor and uses his gifts legitimately in his teaching. He *becomes*, in a wholly sincere way, for the time being that which he wishes to impart. By a subtle and instinctive sympathy he assumes the qualities of that which he is setting forth, whether it is the spirit and tone of the cultivated life in eighteenth-century England or the primitive and generous instincts of our earliest English forefathers.

His success would be the despair of most of us. Yet one should be at least enough of an actor to realize the saving grace of variety—just enough variety—in his process of teaching. A whole hour or period of monotonous drone or shout, or the same length of time spent in a feverish leap from one topic or process to another, is equally wearing upon an audience and equally futile. All-important is the management of the voice. The tired voice, the throaty voice, the invariably high or invariably low voice, the unmodified, the raucous, or the nasal voice, any voice without timbre or feeling, will often defeat other qualifications for excellent teaching. The more is the pity, since these defects can, with a little expert training and practice, be overcome. The small investment which is necessary to get enough of the best training yields ample returns. It saves nerves and strength, for when the voice through mismanagement is wasted and grows fatigued, one finds himself exhausted throughout; and if the voice through long abuse is broken, the chief instrument is gone.

“Without haste, without rest” describes the best behavior in the classroom. The nervous fluttering of the leaves of a book, the scramble in vain pursuit of an elusive quotation, may ruin the effect of a whole recitation. “Without haste, without rest”; and, one may add, “without mannerisms.” I remember that one of the best teachers I ever had, distracted his pupils’ attention and defeated his best efforts by unconsciously performing twice or thrice in an hour an elaborate ritual of removing, inspecting, polishing, inspecting, and readjusting his glasses. Each performance must have taken ten minutes.

These matters are not all that properly belong to the technique of teaching. There are besides the ease and repose which come with mastery, the sureness of touch, the absence of apparent effort and strain, that are not only the result of long practice in any art, but indispensable to success in the art of teaching. Technique and dexterity are, however, so much a part of the whole execution of one’s task that they cannot be discussed as separate matters.

Our definition calls for the exercise of the mind and the imagination in our art. Mind, that is, the more purely intellectual power, is of course necessary, not only in acquiring knowledge requisite

to good teaching, but in seeing the true interrelations of parts of the subject, the relative value of these parts for different purposes, the real significance of a detail, not to say something of the relation of one's own subject to other subjects, its value in itself, and its peculiar usefulness as a tool in realizing the proper end of all teaching. I should say, generally, that the intellectual power of the teacher is measured far less by what he is able to accumulate and hold in memory than by his power to perceive and teach relations, and above all to train his pupils, according to their powers and proficiency, to observe accurately and to make valid inferences and distinctions. Without this his pupils may at best tingle with a certain enthusiasm caught from him momentarily, but even this will not be lasting, nor will it ever be intelligent. They will never be able to perceive the real values in literature, to know good from bad, to reason in a comparatively straight line, to write with tolerable clearness, to know a right word from a wrong one.

We are easily flattered by the enthusiasm of our charges. If only they are interested, we are too quick to infer that they are being taught. But enthusiasm is one thing, discernment another. You recall that high platonic stanza in Shelley's "Love's Philosophy":

See the mountains kiss high heaven,
And the waves clasp one another;
No sister-flower would be forgiven
If it disdain'd its brother:
And the sunlight clasps the earth,
And the moonbeams kiss the sea—
What are all these kissings worth,
If thou kiss not me?

A student once said to his teacher, in a gush of enthusiasm, "Say, that man Shelley was a great poet, wasn't he? Do you know that little gem of his that goes,

What's the use of kissing
If you don't kiss me?"

Admirable enthusiasm! Careless rapture! The sweetly tenuous note of Shelley's fine-strung lyre and the noisy ragtime of Broadway were all one to him.

Mind, discernment, taste, standards, and the power to train capable natures up to these are essential to the good teacher. But the artist works also through his imagination, and indeed through his whole being. If one is to be the actor, the interpreter, the impersonator of the good qualities in literature, and of the qualities necessary to right expression, then which one of us has imagination enough? Through the imagination of the artist these things must become realities to us, we must seize upon them, they must enter into us and possess us, and become incarnate in us. It will require imagination, not only to effect this in our teaching, but also to know our pupils, their variation, their needs, their limitations, and their powers. It will require imagination to study ourselves and see ourselves at a distance. How easy it is to see in a moment what hinders the effectiveness of another's teaching! How long it would take us to discover this or a correspondent defect in ourselves. I am therefore a great believer in the exchange of criticisms. It is a foolish fear which forbids intelligent teachers who know one another sufficiently to inspect one another's teaching and give friendly criticism. Its effect is twofold and reciprocal. It helps the person criticized to discover and correct his faults and often reveals to the critic faults of his own, of which in a lifetime he probably would never have become aware.

Imagination, then—the artist's imagination—is all-important to the successful teacher of English. He has urgent need of it to show him what and where he is, to adjust him to his task and his material, to gauge his efforts and direct them to their proper object—the pupil's mind.

But perhaps the distinguishing characteristic of our profession, which marks it as an art, is that it is creative. Overworked, harassed, interrupted, baffled with a thousand discouragements, required to accomplish our best effect by an inflexible schedule, at a regularly recurring time, regardless of inclination, physical condition, or incentive—in such conditions how can our teaching ever be, except by an occasional chance, in any sense spontaneous, artistic, or creative? Well, frankly, it often cannot. But we may not therefore lose a higher conception of it—one toward which we may ever rise, and which, now and then, in happy moments, we may attain.

At least our place is among the artists of secondary rank such as actors, singers, players, who re-create or interpret the original creations of others. Whether directly teaching literature, or instilling a sense of its primary qualities through the teaching of composition or language, we are continually bringing to life the great things in literature. Through our art they live again and impart themselves in some measure to others. We are to make them vivid, immediate, contemporary, significant, alive—if possible, so living and immediate that they pervade and transmute the very thought and nature of the pupil.

Each hour or period should be conceived as a work of art in itself, as much so as the chapter of a novel or act of a play. It should have the single effect of a work of art, with beginning, middle, and end, as Aristotle says. Part should be organically related to part. The period should be regarded as a short drama, and avail itself of all devices necessary for contrast, or relief, or logical development. The experienced teacher will not attempt many things in a single period. One or two must stand out in the plan as objective. Every effort may then devote itself to making such points focal.

Furthermore, the teacher has an advantage in scope over actor or virtuoso, since the single exercise is but a part of a more or less extended series. This also should be carefully planned, and its artistic qualities should, on a larger scale, be those of the single period. After all, not many things can be taught, and a series or course must not attempt a great variety of effects. Let certain ones be singled out as desirable above the others, and be made the focal points about which the single exercises group themselves.

But our art is creative in another and perhaps better sense. The raw material that comes to our hands is the young and plastic nature of the pupil. I grant that possibly in the greater part it is very raw material and often incapable and hopelessly stubborn. We are under no illusions about this. And yet we must all agree that, where it yields, an incomparable reward awaits us for all our pains, as we see it growing under our art into truer proportion, expressiveness, positive force, and actual beauty. And this, I believe, is the consummation of our joy in our art, and our proof that we are in the higher sense artists.

Let us then consider, for a moment more, our situation as artists. I am aware that it is a difficult situation to maintain. We may be dragged down from it by the inevitable drudgery of our office, and lose all the actual delight of wielding our implements and of feeling our proper material in our hands. Of course, this should not happen. The artist, to remain an artist, must keep himself in some way detached from his work. He must have within reach any device he can find for refreshment of mind and spirit, whether in homely preoccupations of domestic life, or in forgetting himself amid the delights of the open country, or in research, or in companionship with congenial acquaintance *outside* of the profession. As a rule, the *farther* outside, the *better* for this purpose.

Or it often happens that the necessary refreshment and stimulus may be found in contact with great works of art. This I would recommend as a more efficacious, if less common, expedient. A visit to the picture gallery and the leisurely contemplation there of two or three supreme masterpieces, a good symphony or other well-rendered music, an hour of relaxation with some congenial amateur, a good play rendered by good actors, literature of the first class but removed in time or subject from the literature one is teaching—all of these are proper “setting-up” devices for the spirit of the artist-teacher. Only, if refreshment and stimulus are to come through the effect of the arts, the particular examples chosen must be of the higher class. One teacher says that instead of laborious preparation for what he is about to teach he sometimes rouses himself by reading a canto of Dante or a book of the *Odyssey*. It has been tried by others and it works. An important use of lively and cheerful teachers’ meetings is to effect just the mental detachment necessary to our function. It enables us to stand off and see our work in perspective, to compare it with the work of others, or perhaps forget it altogether. Any and every expedient should be employed to save us from professional nearsightedness.

One is likely to object that conditions other than these are necessary to an artistic realization of our work. We are not free. We are hampered by prescriptive programs, college-entrance examinations, athletics, students’ nonsense in a thousand forms, an un-enlightened constituency, the movies, and what not. But these

we must meet patiently. They cannot be successfully met by either impatience or despair. The greatness in the greatest art is often there because the artist found himself confronted by overwhelming obstacles in the world about him. His very sense of defeat was his triumph, because he never compromised his standards, or sold his art, or forsook in the least letter his convictions. And here we come at last upon the one supreme qualification of the artist, his depth of conviction regarding the significance of life itself. This is the main source of inspiration and energy in all his work; this it is which preserves his work from the ravages of time; this keeps it ever sweet and young. By this, and by this only, English as a liberal study will stand, I care not what utilitarian ends it may serve here and there, now and then. It must ever and centrally be administered by a body of men and women whose standards are high and unalterable, whose convictions on essentials are sound, whose instincts are in the larger sense imaginative and creative, that is to say, artistic.